

The Pileated Woodpecker:



Life History & Management

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The pileated woodpecker (*Dryocopus pileatus*) is one of the largest woodpecker species in North America. Only the imperial woodpecker and the ivory-billed woodpecker are larger. Fully grown, it reaches 15-19 inches in length, or about the size of a crow. Its wingspan varies from 26-30 inches, and it weighs about 8-12 ounces. Northern birds tend to be larger in size than birds in other populations.

Appearance

It has a very prominent red crest at the rear of the head with a white throat and mostly black plumage. Contrasting white lines of feathers extend from the bill down the sides of the neck to the bird's upper flanks, with white underwing covert feathers. The adult male has a red forehead, with a red malar area, while the adult female of the species has

a black forehead and black malar stripe. The bill is thick and silvery gray, with yellowish feathers over the nostrils. The eyes of the adult bird are yellow in color. The juvenile is similar to the adult in appearance, but has a shorter crest with brown eyes.

Range & Life History

The range of the pileated woodpecker covers many parts of Canada and the United States. It reaches from western Canada and northern California, east across Canada to Nova Scotia, along the east coast of the United States, down to the southern U.S. including Alabama. It is found in both deciduous and coniferous forests where large trees are present. This bird occupies areas where a lot of dead trees, or snags, are present. The woodpecker's diet consists mainly of insects, wild fruits, and nuts. It feeds especially on carpenter ants, and wood-

boring insect larvae. It obtains its food by scaling bark off trees and creating excavations to expose ant galleries. It uses its long tongue to extract its food.

The pileated woodpecker nests in dead snags by excavating cavities. These cavities are so large that many other animals, including other woodpeckers and small mammals, will use the cavities for both feeding and nesting. A new cavity is excavated each spring. A monogamous species, pileated Woodpeckers will stay with the same mate for life. They have one brood per season during the spring. A typical clutch size is four to six eggs, with both male and female sharing the work of incubating the eggs, feeding the young, as well as creating and maintaining the nest cavity. Young typically fledge the nest after 24-30 days. This timeframe differs with different latitudes and locations. After fledging, the young depend on their parents for several more

months while they are learning to acquire food on their own. In the fall of the year, the young leave their parents and wander until spring. They will nest at this time and acquire their own territories.

Conservation & Management

Natural predators of the pileated woodpecker include hawks, owls, and other raptors, as well as weasels, squirrels, and snakes such as the black rat snake. It depends on a mature forest habitat with many dead snags for nesting. When harvesting timber, leaving some dead snags and hollow trees may be beneficial to cavity nesting birds such as the pileated woodpecker. Areas damaged from lightning, insect infestation, or other natural mortality also provide necessary habitat. This bird was consid-

ered rare prior to 1900, as the result of habitat loss and hunting. It is no longer listed as a threatened or endangered species and although it is currently a protected species, its population is generally considered stable.

In managing forest resources and wildlife, it is often difficult to create a balance between the forest's needs and those of game and non-game wildlife. If you are interested in more information on multiple-use management of your property, including species such as the pileated woodpecker, please contact your local county office of the Alabama Forestry Commission. 📞



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